Contemplative Landscapes
Rich Smukler

Cover: @*Rich Smukler*

As fine art photography turned from Pictorialism to the perfectionism of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Judy Dater, and Linda Conner, many nature and landscape photographers sought the ultra-sharp, grain-free, and exquisitely-modulated black-and-white contact prints made from large-format cut film negatives. Switching from 35mm was worth it for image quality, but the work was very slow; an 8x10, its heavy tripod, carriers, and paraphernalia, meant that only one set-up and one or two exposures could be made in a session, rather than shooting a roll of 36. It was said that the slow pace and meticulous caution could be best described as "contemplative." Modern equipment and software have reached new heights and truly beautiful color and black-and-white images are possible without a truckload of heavy equipment, but, as artist-photographer Rich Smukler's work and words make clear, the attitude and approach of "contemplative photography" continue to apply.

Inspired by both the perfectionist tradition and on the mystical drift of artists and thinkers like Minor White and Andy Karr, Smukler's work and words in this series offer a thoughtful definition of contemplative photography and suggest a pathway into understanding the complex relationship between the landscape and the artist in its midst. Smukler's portfolio centers on California wild lands and deserts where the physical demands of the climate require careful preparation and awareness; they call it Death Valley for a reason. For photographers, the light is extreme, creating inky shadows and piercing highlights in monochrome, and working in color requires an extra layer of technical skill. But, the difficulty, the silence, and the spatial emptiness seem to be perfect for this artist and his work, presenting a perfect combination of remarkable vistas and the solitary focus and feeling to receive and express what he finds. His contemplative approach marks a deliberate turn away from any pre-planned, trophy-hunting mentality toward something closer to a zen openness: a state of receptive attention in which an image announces itself with sudden vividness, a gift from the seeing, sensing, intuitive, creative mind of the artist.

Rich Smucker

Lone Pine, California, is famous for being a gateway to Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States. Nearby, is the stunning landscape of the Alabama Hills, used in countless Westerns and blockbusters and showcased at the Museum of Western Film History. Although only a few miles from town, this 18,600-acre National Scenic Area can give one the feeling of being lost in time. Hidden coves, arches, and rocks, with awesome views of Mt. Whitney and the Sierra Nevada can provide hours of contemplative solitude.

As with much of my photography, early morning shooting, waiting for the sunrise, usually gets it done. I remember the cold pushing through me as I set up my tripod, armed with headlamp, gloves, and ski parka. Remember that moving your camera from a warm car or building to a frigid outside can cause condensation on your lens and mess with your camera. Not a pleasant thing. Consider your settings beforehand (to the best of your ability) and before you step outside. You don't need to be fussing with your camera when you get out in the cold.

Alabama Hills #1

The Alabama Hills are a range of hills and rock formations near the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada in the Owens Valley, west of Lone Pine in Inyo County, California. It is situated between Yosemite and Death Valley National Parks and offers a distinct mix of natural beauty and cinematic history. From Lone Pine you are approximately 100 to 130 miles (about a 2 to 2.5-hour drive) west of the main visitor areas of Death Valley.

I would ordinarily avoid focusing on the foreground so dramatically, but I was engaged by its textural and eye-capturing intensity. The snow-capped mountains behind, along with the night sky, set the foreground magnificently.

Alabama Hills #2

As a young photographer, I recall the excitement that would overtake me when I saw and approached an image that engaged me, that warranted my desire to "capture" or otherwise gather it into my growing collection of images. I had not yet been introduced to the concept of photographic contemplation. It changes everything. This study of images "From Lone Pine to Death Valley" expresses a time when my approach to the world of photography had forever changed.

A sense of aloneness swept over me as I walked this moon-like tundra. One of my first teachers, David Alan Harvey, a full member of Magnum Photos and who has photographed extensively for *National Geographic Magazine*, hammered on the need to create multiple dimensions and depth in your imagery. In this piece there are at least four planes with a textural balance between the rock formations and embracing colors of a setting sun.

Alabama Hills #3

Rich Smukler

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This is just me celebrating the flat-out joy of being where I was and doing what I love to do. The size of my shadow helps provide a sense of proportion to the massive size and dimension of the surrounding rock formations. I know you can't see my smile, but that's me waving back at you!

Alabama Hills #4

After several fantastic days at Lone Pine and Alabama Hills, I checked out of the hotel, grabbed a very early breakfast and headed down the road to Death Valley, first stop Eureka Dunes. Though the drive would take over two hours, I was stopped in my tracks by this inspiring image and had to pull over to the side of the road. This lonely tree with The Sierra Nevada Range as a backdrop still brings a smile to my face.

George DeWolfe was a master photographer and printer and mentor. His images are born out of the penetrating awareness of photographic moments that are highly personal, intuitive and sublime. He studied under legendary figures Ansel Adams and Minor White. I was exceptionally privileged to have been under his tutelage.

Only in retrospect, and as I am writing this piece for you, do I recall something that George pointed out to me about my work. He discussed how so many artists lean on the concept of the "Rule of Thirds" as a guideline for fine composition. And yet, he noted, much of my work embraces more of a "Rule of Twos." In other words, I often split my composition in half, not thirds. He liked that and pointed out its uniqueness. And he suggested I continue in that vein. This piece is one of those.

Lone Pine #5

I arrived at Eureka Dunes as the sun was already rising. The heat had begun to cook as well. It lies in the remote Eureka Valley, covers three miles long, and includes the tallest sand dunes in California, possibly all of North America. It is a tough climb to its summit with the sand giving way beneath your feet. The view from the top is well worth the effort. I was also rewarded with what is referred to as the "singing sand." Somehow when the sand falls down the face of the highest dune, a sound like a bass note of a pipe organ or airplane is made. So strange in such a solitary setting. Incidentally, this particular piece was the image George DeWolfe was critiquing when he pointed out the "Rule of Twos" previously discussed.

Eureka Dunes, Death Valley #6

The photographic challenge of sun glare is ever present. Consider the bright sun reflecting off the sand impeding your ability to see what your view finder has to reveal. Might I suggest a product made by Hoodman. It clips over your view finder and helps manage the glare issue.

Eureka Dunes, Death Valley #7

There is something special about the vastness of this area. You must take deep breaths to bring in the magnitude and quietude these dunes have to offer. The surrounding desert overwhelms and requires a quiet careful reflection in order to capture images of the moment. Remember that Death Valley can get terribly hot. Hydration and sunscreen are critical. Make certain someone knows where you are and a means of communication is kept open.

Eureka Dunes, Death Valley #8

Rich Smukler

Another early morning venture, cold, setting up for the sunrise. The sun peeks out, and in a matter of minutes the shoot is over. Time for hot coffee and breakfast. This is an iconic location in Death Valley that provides a magnificent vista for both morning and sunset shooting. The shadows, the light, the design of the lines are all there for your taking.

Zabriskie Point, Death Valley #9

Just the name is enough to draw you to this surreal location. It is the lowest point in North America at 282 feet below sea level. The salt flats cover nearly 200 square miles. Standing in its midst at early dawn, with the sun rising and the black mountains as a backdrop, it is as eerie as it gets. You can hear yourself breathe. You are alone in one of the most incredible surroundings that you can imagine.

Badwater Basin, Death Valley #10

Rich Smucker

Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes is located near Stovepipe Wells Village, where I was staying for my time in Death Valley. The hike to and from the parking lot at the Dunes area is about two miles. I was there in September. In the summer temperatures can exceed 120 degrees F. Pay attention! You might want to pare down your equipment and only take what you think you might need. Bring water. Also be mindful and respectful of the land on which you are walking. This is the ancestral home of the Timbisha Shoshone people.

Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes, Death Valley #11

Artist Interview - Rich Smukler

They say that sufferers from "photo flu" get better but they never get well. How did you catch it?

I had a Kodak Brownie-Hawkeye camera as a young man and have never looked back. Out of college, my first job was with the Rohm & Haas Company in Philadelphia (now defunct) as a public relations and advertising copywriter. I often wrote about certain applications of company products at locations across the country. The company armed me with a camera and unlimited film to help put together the articles sought. They

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also encouraged the use of the camera to my heart's content and didn't seem to care how much film I used, professionally or privately. If you remember back in the day, before digital, this could get rather costly, not like today where you can take tons of images without cost.

Photo remained secondary to your next career step, too.

Working as an ad copywriter was a stop along the way towards my attending Villanova School of Law from which I

graduated and eventually opened my law practice in Philadelphia. My love of photography stuck with me, but I was seriously diverted from my creative pursuits. It wasn't until I "retired" from the practice of law, and moved to Florida, that the flames were re-ignited.

Going back, do you remember the first "decent" photo you made, perhaps the one that started everything?

The highlights of an early portfolio were several images from Spring Mountain Ski area outside of Philadelphia. The snow and fog veiled the trees creating an eerie, ghostlike setting that caught my eye. To this day, I keep my camera battery charged and ready to go, in hopes of a morning fog to capture yet another atmospheric wonder.

Many of us put the scare quotes around "retired" because getting serious about photography has actually meant more work. Talk about your training and trajectory?

Digital camera work was still developing, but I still shot with my trusty Canon AE1. A friend of mine was closely affiliated with Toscana Photographic Workshop (TPW) in San Quirico d'Orcia, Italy, and asked if I might be interested in taking classes. I showed him my limited portfolio, which he shared with the owner of TPW, and they encouraged my attendance.

The best and quickest way to learn your craft as a photographer is to attend a top-notch school. I was fortunate to have attended TPW for seven fabulous summers, learning from the best the world of photography had to offer in a magical country. I studied under David Alan Harvey, a Magnum and *National Geographic* photographer, Sandro Santioli, one of Italy's foremost landscape photographers, and Arno Rafael Minkkinen, a Finnish-American teacher whose works are praised worldwide, just to name a few. During those years, living in South Florida, the

Palm Beach Photo Center was in my back yard. It also was stocked with fine teachers and resources. I studied under George DeWolfe, who was my most influential teacher, Lawrence Gartel, considered by some to be the father of digital art, Jim Zuckerman, and others.

Does training in other fine art media or technical crafts work into your photography?

Somewhere along the line, I became fascinated with glass art. I collected fine art glass pieces and eventually set up a studio in my home in Pennsylvania, first working with stained glass and then studying and making fused glass pieces. I had some modest success showing these works in quite a few galleries around the country, but I eventually drifted back to photography. Though much of my photographic editing and printing is of course done indoors, there was a freedom in being outside, shooting, travelling for the shot, that was lost with my working with glass. There is a definite cross-over between both of these endeavors in the way I look at art, design my pieces, and intuit what I think is my acceptable goal. I always lean towards the abstract. Even though you might look at my landscapes, or other pieces, and see realism, it is the shape, line, light, and texture that drives the composition, not so much the substance of the image itself.

In addition to your personal practice, you teach, mentor, curate, and consult. What do you like about that role? Any drawbacks?

I have had the honor of being a guest lecturer at the Boca Raton Museum of Art photography classes as well as a juror in several competitions. I found each of the experiences uplifting. There is something about analyzing and explaining an action which you do instinctively

and reducing it to its basic parts. It can be a little intimidating at first, kind of like the parable of the centipede trying to describe how to walk.

What advice do you have for the many photographers who find their own landscapes disappointing?

Look behind you! Look down! Look up! Don't get hung up on the classic landscape. There is so much more to see. Crawling through the rock formations, I stumbled upon this

Alabama Hills #12

image. It reminded me of the profile of, perhaps, a Native American who might have roamed here many years ago. So, I would call this piece more expressionistic as opposed to just an abstract, not to belittle abstracts!

To put it slightly differently, how do we get from a good start to real competence and creativity?

I feel quite strongly about how an artist searches for and achieves their personal identity. Millions of young, aspiring

artists will robotically emulate and seek to copy the masters of their particular genre. I can appreciate that and applaud the gleaning of historical context necessary to move forward. It fine-tunes the artist's point of view and sharpens the ability to communicate using the language of the trade, not just the simplistic employment of empty superlatives. Once a technical mastery of the trade is achieved, it becomes critical for the artist to seek a niche that will set them apart from all others, a goal not easily reached. It requires a dedication to experimentation and hard work. The trail should be littered with failed projects, huge missteps, and tons of tossed paper and ink. After all that, one must not get frozen to a first success, but continue to grow, experiment, and evolve.

What's the best advice you ever received?

LOSE THE PHONE! Allow yourself to pay attention to your photography, not everything else going on in your life. My first trip to Death Valley was culture shock. No cell service! The only phone service was a single phone booth (remember those?) at the motel. People would line up in the evening to use it. It reminded me of shows on TV where inmates were lined up to call home, or for their one phone call from jail! During the day, while we were out shooting, there was no service. At first, for a day or so, I felt kind of jittery about that, being used to checking my phone for calls periodically. After a while, the isolation was totally freeing. You were in this amazing place with no distractions, nothing but your mind and your camera. From then on, wherever I shoot, the phone is turned off. It makes all the difference in the world.

How have your seen your own art change over time?

The most significant change is the manner in which I mentally prepare myself to take an image, edit, and finally print it. Early

on in my photographic career, my excitement level was extraordinarily high any time I had camera in hand and a subject near. The thrill of hitting the shutter and moving on to the next shot was a whirl. I didn't spend enough quiet time to prepare my mind for the overall process.

Alabama Hills, Lone Pine #17

Some years ago, I was introduced to the now late George DeWolfe, who was by far the finest photography teacher I have had the pleasure to study under. George and his partner, Lydia Goetze, developed an approach they called "Contemplative Landscape Photography," which he and they taught at a variety of locations including China and the American West. His workshop students respected both his artistic vision and his technical expertise. As a result of his contemplative work, one of his students inducted him into the White Plum lineage of Japanese Zen as a sensei (teacher). George's images are born out of the penetrating awareness of photographic moments that are highly personal, intuitive, and sublime.

> "It is the purpose of Contemplation to return us to the world of the real, and the role of Contemplative Photography is to express it. Contemplative Photography is where a calm and aware mind unites with the primary elements of human vision. It is the clear visual expression of reality."
>
> —George DeWolfe

Sounds like the contemplative approach is a sort of yoga or meditation for you?

My personal love affair with photography provides me with the avenue through which I can seek an inner peace through my craft. With camera in hand, I can travel anywhere and find a meditative space that I am otherwise unable to achieve. Perhaps that shows a personal inner weakness, but it is the method that works for me. I look and see differently when I am looking through the lens of my camera. Typically, when I frame a piece in my viewfinder, I do so by deconstructing the scene or object into a canvas of shapes, designs. and colors—not the way I usually look at life on a day-to-day basis.

I have often thought of the meaning of success. How does one personally define that from one's own perspective? For much of my work-life career I have been an attorney specializing in litigation. The last decade or so, I have worked in the legal field exclusively as a mediator—very different from the field of trial law. Yet the marker for a successful lawyer is most often measured financially. How much do you earn? This in spite of the style or technique which gets you to the bottom line.

As a photographer, I have a different point of view. It is mostly a creative endeavor for me, with earning money as a secondary goal entirely. That isn't to say that I close my eyes to the marketing of my work, sales of images to individuals, etc. But for me, financial success as a creative is secondary. I find positive reinforcement from industry professionals as a more meaningful yardstick. The joy and excitement I receive from the process of shooting, editing, and printing a fine image more accurately defines my idea of success.

in varying proportions, most artists are in it for both love AND money, though. Describe the "business" part of your practice?

The bottom line is that I really don't shoot with any concern about what others might think. I have explored many genres and styles: abstract, black and white, travel, landscape, portraiture, etc., with only my personal sense of aesthetics in mind. I know it sounds selfish, but it is the only way I can feel as though my work is satisfactory. Over the years, I see how my images have evolved and I self-edit and regulate my concept of what an image should be. I of course am thrilled when someone, or others, are pleased with my work in some way, and am happy to accommodate them in decorating their homes, adding to their collections, offices, or wherever the work finds a pleasing landing spot.

The art market is clearly changing. Early on my focus was working with galleries and allowing gallerists to be my marketing agents. Galleries seem to be having a tough time these days. Galleries I have worked with in Vienna, Rome, Tuscany, Boca Raton, and Philadelphia have all closed. Consequently, I have begun using online companies such as Fine Art America, Saatchi Art, IndieWalls, as well as my own website to tap into the marketplace.

You've gotten around. When / how did you start roaming? Does travel impact your photography? Does photography direct your travel?

My seven summers at TPW in Italy got me started. After my workshops at TPW, I would spend several weeks travelling to different sections of Italy incorporating whatever wisdom I might have picked up during class. I have since taken workshops or travelled solo to Mexico, Canada, Eastern Africa, Asia, much of Europe and, of course, the United States. I am not so sure changing locations improves your photography. It is all in your head. However, a new and interesting environment kicks up the adrenalin and gets you thinking a bit differently. My home base is Jupiter, Florida, less than an hour north of West Palm Beach. Travel is not essential to my work; however, new and different locations can be inspirational and can jumpstart the flow of creative juices.

The ghost town of Rhyolite, Death Valley, is thirty-five miles from the Furnace Creek Visitor's Center. It is a peculiar

town that fell prey to the financial panic of 1907. I found an abundance of interesting possibilities there after wandering through and over the natural wonders of Death Valley.

For some, it's the eye behind the viewfinder that matters; others say "A surgeon doesn't operate with a butter knife." What's the relevance of equipment to your work?

I'll go with the eye any time. The question reminds me of when I was skiing many years ago. We all were outfitting ourselves with the correctly-shaped skis, bindings, boots, goggles, etc. As we looked up towards the top of the hill, we could see the most graceful, accomplished skier you could imagine, poetically working his way down the mountain. When he got closer, we could see his dilapidated boots and bindings and beat up skis. He didn't need any of the fancy, updated, and expensive gear. You need of course basic photographic equipment, but I think it is overkill to try and stay up with Joneses.

Were you an early adopter of digital technology? A frequent updater, or is yours a familiar, settled system that rarely changes?

My first year at TPW, I was still shooting analog with my Canon AE-1. They would batch out the film at the end of the day and, if we were lucky we would get our prints back in the next day or two. Those who were shooting digital got theirs back much quicker. It seemed a sea-change which I couldn't hold back. Giving up my home lab in exchange for learning Adobe Lightroom was something of a shock to the system, but after taking several weeks of class, I personally found Lightroom to be incredibly powerful in conjunction with a front-line printer. I use Epson along with a wide array

of archival papers and conforming Epson inks. I am very comfortable with my Canon EOS 6D and more often than not, I will be shooting with my EF 24-105mm. On occasion I will use my EF 100-400mm zoom lens. I will stick with my DSLR and have no inclination to move over to mirrorless. Though I understand there can be some advantages and disadvantages to both, I simply am comfortable with my camera and happy with its results. There is enough to think about without having to add another layer of technology. I'd rather spend more of my time thinking about the image and composition intuitively.

Printers, on the other hand, have advanced in their technology. My newly acquired Epson SureColor P900 automatically switches between Matte Black (MK) and Photo black (PK) ink, a dramatic improvement over its predecessor.

So, "finished" means "printed," not just "posted?"

Yes. I believe to be the complete photographer, one must control the entire process. To sub out editing or printing takes away your ability to finish the job as you envision it. To assume a print lab will come up with the same image as you would is foolishness to the nth degree.

What's next? More travel? A book? A show?

I will have a study of my infrared photography in **SoloS – 21st International Juried Solo Exhibition** this winter, date to be determined. As we speak, I am charging up my recently acquired drone, getting ready for a morning flight. I am brand spanking new at this, but thought it might be an interesting endeavor. I can already envision some aerial abstracts that I'd like to try and work with.

Links

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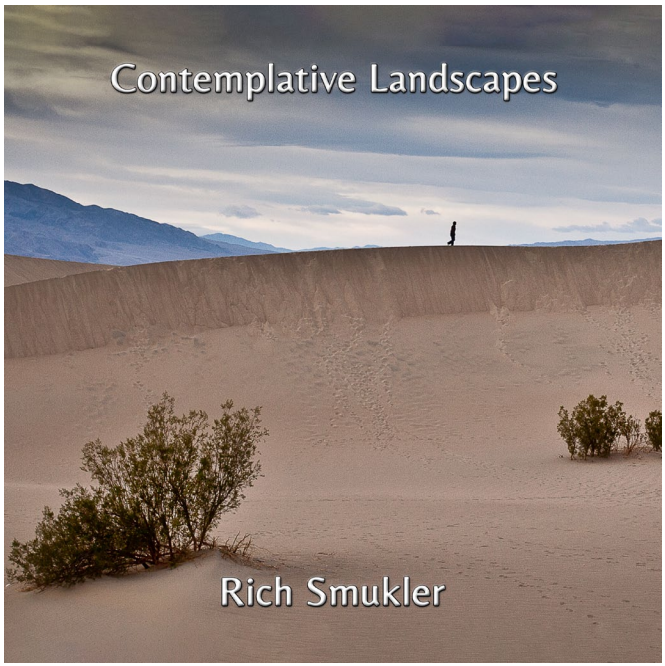

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